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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7739
INFO RUEHXK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 001160

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PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/16/2016

TAGS: PGOV SY LE I2

SUBJECT: SYRIAN FORCES REPORTEDLY CLASH WITH JUND A-SHAM,
KILLING TWO

REF: 05 DAM 6423

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons
1.4 b/d

¶1. (U) The official Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) reported that Syrian troops killed the "most wanted member of the Jund al-Sham terrorist and takfiri organization" and his bodyguard on March 15 in Zabadani about 30 miles northwest of Damascus, seizing weapons, documents and a computer. Mohammad Ali Nasif and his bodyguard, Yasser Adawi, were killed in the shoot-out, while a member of Syrian security forces was wounded, according to media reports. In the past year, media have reported several clashes between the Jund al-Sham and Syrian forces; the most recent publicized incidents occurred in December in the northern part of Syria (reftel).

¶2. (SBU) Long-time Damascus-based AP correspondent Albert Aji told Poloff that he had seen reports on some Web sites that Nasif had been wanted in connection with facilitating the transit of foreign fighters to Iraq and that he was believed to have traveled back and forth between Syria and Lebanon. Aji had no further details on the clashes, other than that reported in SANA.

¶3. (C) Comment: There are two common Syrian interpretations to the string of reported clashes between Syrian security forces and the Jund al-Sham over the past year. The first, often from members of Syria's civil society groups or human rights organizations, argues that the SARG is fabricating such accounts to persuade the U.S. and the West that it is taking steps to prevent foreign fighters from infiltrating Iraq and that it is confronting a rising Islamist force. The second interpretation, which Aji and others tend to support, suggests that the SARG is truly taking steps against Islamists but seeks to control information to limit an extremist backlash.

¶4. (C) Comment Continued: It is our view that the SARG does seem to be taking action against some fundamentalist groups, many of them tied to efforts to support the insurgency in Iraq, although we suspect the principal targets are those groups the SARG perceives as threatening its own well-being. The SARG's campaign is not, however, always highly publicized, except at carefully timed opportunities.

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